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After the cleanup, a boathouse perchance?

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Grant Park boosters join paddling group in eyeing DuSable Park as canoe and kayak hub

Setting aside, for now, preliminary forays into a DuSable Park design, Park District officials are waiting for word from Environmental Protection Agency officials that cleanup of the would-be greenspace—dedicated back in 1987, only to test positive two years ago for radioactive thorium—is underway. EPA officials are waiting for executives from Kerr-McGee, the Oklahoma City-based energy company that has inherited the responsibility—and the headache—of sanitizing DuSable Park, to spring for a detailed examination of the site and an ensuing cleanup.

Meanwhile, the park lies dormant, fenced off, and overgrown.

"It's become such a bureaucratic mess," said Bob O'Neill, president of the nearby Grant Park Advisory Council, who's long been pushing for DuSable Park's decontamination and development. "The environmental issue is the crux of it. Quite frankly, the EPA needs to concentrate more on working with Kerr-McGee to make sure this gets cleaned up."

That's just what the agency is doing, according to EPA site coordinator Fred Micke. Ever since a few early tests turned up the possibility of thorium contamination in December of 2000, EPA officials have labored toward a pact with Kerr-McGee execs that would have the energy company funding further tests and a final remediation that could include anything from capping the site with concrete to digging out and replacing tons of its

soil. So far, though, nothing's been signed.

According to Debbie Schramm, spokesman for Kerr-McGee, officials there are still negotiating with the EPA. According to Micke, they were all surprised by the mild winter, and soil-sampling EPA staffers could be on-site at DuSable Park in the next few months.

"We're trying to get an agreement done as quickly as possible," Micke said. "Last year, we figured we wouldn't be able to get out there until March or April anyway, but it's been so warm. If Old Man Winter stays away, we might get out there this summer."

The cleanup, though, is a different, and more slippery, thing altogether. Radioactive thorium, it seems, seeped into much of Streeterville, and represents the last remains of the Lindsay Light Company, an incandescent lamp factory that departed for West Chicago sometime in 1931 and was snapped up by officials at Kerr-McGee 36 years later. According to Micke, cleanup of Streeterville's thorium contamination—and DuSable's, too—will be conducted on a kind of need-to-basis.

"Basically how it's worked on is in the order that sites are being developed," Micke said.

Fenced safely away from the public, DuSable Park doesn't present much of an urgent case.

"As long as it's in that mode and the property is covered with

asphalt, there's no health risk," Micke said. "There's no need to do anything right away. The need kicks in once someone wants to develop the park."

Meanwhile, officials at the Park District are biding their time. Insisting "nothing has changed" there, spokesman Angelynne Amores said any efforts toward developing the greenspace before it's spotless would be fruitless.

"You can't put the cart before the horse," Amores said. "There's no way we can begin the park development until we find out why Kerr-McGee is not picking up the thorium."

Still, O'Neill said he's hoping to stir up a little urgency, in part by presenting Park District officials and local residents with possibilities for the park's design. Never mind that any concrete discussion of what shape the greenspace might take could still be years off.

"Why are we the ones who have to keep pushing this along?" O'Neill said. "We should be the ones just thinking about what the park's going to look like."

And he is. One of the most promising possibilities for DuSable Park, according to O'Neill, is one proposed a few months ago by leaders of the Chicago River Rowing and Paddling Center, a 22-year-old organization providing people-powered access to the river from out of a broken-down Coast

Guard Station across the harbor. At a Jan. 23 Grant Park Advisory Council meeting, Susan Urbas, the rowing and paddling center's president, offered an audience of roughly 30 an explanation of her group's vision for DuSable Park. For the most part, it includes a sculpture garden encircling a heroic statue of Jean Baptiste Pointe du Sable, Chicago's fur-trading founder himself, an interpretive center extolling du Sable's contribution to the city's domestication, and a new boathouse for storing and launching canoes, kayaks, and rowing shells.

"It was an epiphany for me to think of the synergy between what we need, which is a first-class facility for rowing, and what du Sable was all about," Urbas said in an interview Monday. "Chicago was founded because of where it was in relation to water."

Calling Urbas' proposal organized and thoughtful, O'Neill said he'd fielded quite a few phone calls and E-mails from residents interested in seeing a boathouse at DuSable Park.

"I got a lot of positive feedback from that presentation," O'Neill said. "A lot of people here don't go on the water because they don't own their own sailboat ... This proposal offers an interactive program more in keeping with the history, more interpretive, more educational. And you could launch a human-powered craft right there."

Still, Amores warned against harboring any serious plans just yet. The thorium's still out there, she said.

"The original conceptual designs are still there," she said. "Can they be changed? Yes. Can they be replaced with something else? Yes. Can they be picked up and used for the park? Yes. You cannot put the cart before the horse."

An environmental lawyer herself who's joined the effort to get DuSable cleaned up, Urbas said she's got no illusions about the status of DuSable Park. Still, she said, there's no harm in making a pitch to the Park District.

"Part of what we're thinking is that there needs to be a vision for the park, so people will push the EPA and then the Park District once the EPA is gone. If people are excited about a particular vision put a lot more pressure on them. Right now it's rather vague."

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